

Lithuania sees freedom as test for perestroika

VILNIUS, U.S.S.R. (AP) — Despite Mikhail Gorbachev's show of force and barrage of demands, Lithuanians keep assuring themselves the Soviet president will not use force to crush their independence because his reform program would die with it.

"It would be the end of perestroika and Gorbachev's policy and his authority," said Lithuanian Premier Kazimiera Prunskiene. "I don't think Gorbachev would take such a measure."

Western diplomats and political figures agree.

"It would undermine his policy in Europe, end perestroika and probably not even be successful," said one high-ranking diplomat in Moscow. In an era of reform, Soviet soldiers might refuse to use force against Lithuanians, the dip-

lomat said.

In the past week, tanks and armored personnel carriers have rumbled through the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, and Gorbachev has issued a flurry of directives to Lithuanians, including a demand that they turn in all their firearms and stop signing up for volunteer service.

Soviet media have painted the Lithuanian government that declared independence March 11 as pushing the republic either toward anarchy or political repression. In an interview printed Sunday, Gen. Valentin I. Varennikov, commander of Soviet ground forces, charged that independence leaders were preparing to jail Communists.

But the streets of the Lithuanian capital have been calm throughout

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the political tension, and citizens interviewed on the streets have expressed few fears of pending military action.

Gorbachev and his advisers have said they do not intend to use force in Lithuania. Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze, a close adviser to Gorbachev, told reporters during his trip to Africa last week that the Soviet Union is "particularly against the use of force domestically."

But Gorbachev has pledged to keep the Soviet Union together, and he has been unable to bend the Lithuanians with argument and political pressure. His tough reaction to the declaration of independence has added caution to the Lithuanians' confidence that he won't use force.

The Lithuanian government on Thursday night appealed to the world to speak out against any possible use of force by Soviet soldiers, and early Saturday passed a resolution transferring power to a longtime diplomat of independent Lithuania in Washington if the government is detained.

The Soviet Union "is accustomed to solving its problems, externally and internally, with the use of force," said Algimantas Cekuolis, who until independence was declared served as a legislator in the Soviet parliament.

Lithuanian officials and Western diplomats say Gorbachev would risk wrecking his opening to the West, including the nearly completed agreements on slashing nuclear weapons by 50 percent and the removal of hundreds of thousands of troops from front lines in central Europe.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, arriving in Moscow on Sunday, said use of force would put Gorbachev's relationship with the United States at risk.

"Any resolution of the issue other than through discussions would have very significant and damaging implications for that relationship," said Kennedy, D-Mass.

On Thursday, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution 93-0 urging the Soviet Union to stop intimidating Lithuanians and warning that use of military force "would have severe

repercussions for U.S.-Soviet relations."

"If he uses force in the Baltics, he can't maintain his current worldwide standing," Prunskiene said, "and relations between the Soviet Union and other states could not remain the way they have been until now."

A violent reaction also likely would cut the flow of foreign investment so desperately needed by the Soviet Union's collapsing economy. Kremlin officials last week for the first time hinted that the economy is in such bad shape that it might need outright foreign aid similar to the Marshall Plan that helped Germany recover after World War II.

Western credits were temporarily suspended to China after that country cracked down on pro-democracy demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. Foreign businessmen, who had been increasingly disenchanted with China because of growing economic problems, have been reluctant to return because of uncertainty about the country's stability.